FICK, VIRGINIA GUNN. Ellen Glasgow's Gothicism. (1973)
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A close study of Ellen Glasgow's work reveals a clear, if uneven, strain of Gothicism running throughout. It begins in her poems as the use of macabre imagery and the concern with Evil and in her short stories as psychological and supernatural inquiry. From these bits and pieces the Gothicism evolves in her novels into a persistent theme -- that Evil is in Nature and Nature is sovereign over man -- a theme appropriately reinforced by Gothic motifs.

Chapter I shows that although the Gothic quality in Ellen Glasgow's writing was largely ignored by the critics and never acknowledged by Glasgow herself, it nevertheless grew naturally out of her affinities with other Gothic writers, her cultural milieu, and her own temperament and life experiences.

In Chapter II an examination of one large group of Glasgow's poems reveals how she used the imagery of death to arouse feeling and how she was beginning to work toward her definition of Evil. A group of five short stories likewise shows an interest in Evil and a developing probe into the nature of the inner man.

Chapter III exposes the pattern of Gothic theme supported by Gothic elements that exists in thirteen selected novels. The sovereignty of Nature is expressed through the erupting passions of lust, rage, and revenge, as well as through the natural forces of darkness, death, and decay. Moreover, out of this main theme three prominent sub-themes emerge: aristocratic debility, the effect of soil upon soul, and the influence of the past. These themes are accompanied by a full assortment of traditional Gothic elements. Together they construct the Gothicism

which must be considered a salient characteristic of Ellen Glasgow's literary style.

ELLEN GLASGOW'S GOTHICISM

by

Virginia Gunn Fick

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Thesis Adviser

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Committee Donald G. Darnell

Charles E. Davis

Robert L. Kelly

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CHAPTER I

INFLUENCES AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Beginning with the publication of her first novel, The Descendant, in 1897 when she was only twenty-four years old and ending with her death in 1945 at age seventy-two, Ellen Glasgow's literary career spanned nearly fifty years. During a half-century as the writer of works with extensive popular appeal, she published nineteen novels, a small volume of poems, a collection of short stories, a set of prefaces to thirteen of her novels, numerous articles and reviews, and an autobiography. Yet, despite the length of her career and her public popularity, Ellen Glasgow received little more than moderate attention from the critics. Her books were regularly reviewed, occasionally with enthusiasm, by reputable critics, and she is consistently mentioned in historical surveys of the literary scene. But it was after her best work had been bypassed by the Pulitzer Committee that she finally received its prize in 1941 for In This Our Life. And further, the serious study of her work, sparse at best, has neglected Ellen Glasgow's Gothic quality and the definition of Evil which it supports. Hence this study.

In the development of her style, the concerns and devices of her poems and short stories forecast the themes and motifs of her novels, but while Ellen Glasgow's poems show an awareness of Evil, her novels show a knowledge of it. They define Evil as a part of Nature that exists internally as passion and externally as force and assert that in both forms nature is sovereign over man. While her poems make use of macabre

imagery to involve the reader emotionally, her novels employ a wide range of fear-evoking, Evil-suggesting images to create a hovering darkness. And while her short stories reveal an interest in the creative power of man's inner nature, Glasgow's novels state the conviction that there is a destructive power, the passions, in man's inner nature.

The Gothic fragments found in her short works are, in the novels, enlarged and expanded into a resounding theme which says that Nature rules the inner man through the primitive passions, through his animal urgings toward desire and revenge and that this authority is equalled by the power of Nature's external forces: darkness, decay, and death. Man is no match either for the passions or for the forces. Nature is sovereign. Whatever is softened by decay, whether it is a man's character, his social institutions, or the brick wall of his dwelling, will soon be covered over by Nature's new growth. Enhancing this theme is a structure formed by a uniform tone of melancholy and the persistent use of motifs of darkness, death, and decay as well as other Gothic elements, such as the wild, untended garden, the enchanted or haunted forest, ghosts, and the presence of madness, idiocy, deformity, and witchcraft.

Most of Ellen Glasgow's novels assert the sovereignty of Nature through the passions, but <u>all</u> of the thirteen novels covered by this study affirm the sovereignty of Nature through the forces of darkness, death, and decay. The strength of this point is found in its formulation into three sub-themes: aristocratic debility, the effect of soil upon soul, and the influence of the past. The importance of these sub-themes is not only that they occur prominently in Glasgow's novels but also that they recur in much of the Southern fiction of the twentieth

century. The idea of aristocratic debility has been a persistent theme in the work of Faulkner and others; the effect of soil upon soul was a ruling idea of the agrarian tradition in Southern literature; and the influence of the past is a concept that has haunted most of recent Southern literature.

But what exactly does Glasgow's main theme have to do with Gothicism? For one thing, it defines Evil. The Gothicists were always trying to pinpoint Evil. They depicted it in various human forms or as malevolent circumstance. For another, it defines Evil in terms of Nature as a wild and sovereign force. The Gothic landscape of eighteenth century England celebrated these very characteristics of Nature in such features as ivy-enshrouded ruins and stony precipices with torrents of water rushing over them. Finally, Miss Glasgow's theme of man's subjection to the power of his primitive inner nature follows the American translation of the Gothic quest, the exploration of the inner man, pursued by Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe before her.

Paradoxically, Ellen Glasgow herself never acknowledged any connection with the Gothic tradition in literature. In fact, she was scornful of what she called "Southern Gothic," her description[1] of the vast, disordered sensibility in twentieth-century fiction, and she continually expressed an attitude of revulsion toward it. In a 1935 article for the Saturday Review Miss Glasgow condemned the "mass

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[1]Cf. George B. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 665 in which he credits Ellen Glasgow with the label "Southern Gothic." She used it in a speech, given before the Friends of the Princeton Library on April 25, 1935, and published later in the Saturday Review under the title "Heroes and Monsters."

production of degeneracy" in Southern fiction, calling the emphasis on the grotesque and the horrible a "sophisticated barbarism" and the "sentimental cult of corruption."[2] Moreover, in her correspondence with literary friends she frequently alluded to "Gothic" and her association of that term with what she called the "American horror-mongers"[3] and their fascination with the repulsive. She considered William Faulkner the leading exponent of the "School of Raw-Head-and-Bloody-Bones."[4]

Although these instances represent her most consistent view of Gothicism, there are indications that she appreciated certain aspects of Gothic fiction. A Certain Measure, the collection of prefaces she wrote to the novels re-published by Scribner's in 1938 as the Virginia Edition, contains the following statement on horror in literature:

> The sense of horror is not only human, it is a useful, and entirely legitimate, literary motif. None of us, I imagine, is completely immune from its power.[5]

She continued, citing Daniel Defoe's view, which he wrote in his preface to Moll Flanders, that the fascination with horror in fiction is due to its involvement of the reader's emotions.[6] The interest of Southern writers in the horrible was, she said, the logical result of "our earlier hallucination, the sentimental fallacy," or, she suggested, a carry-over

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[2]"Heroes and Monsters," Saturday Review of Literature, 4 May 1935, p. 3.

[3]Blair H. Rouse, ed., Letters of Ellen Glasgow (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), p. 208.

[4]"Heroes and Monsters," p. 3.

[5]New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943, p. 69.

[6]Ibid., pp. 69-70.

from the eighteenth century appetite for scaffold confessions.[7] Ten years earlier, in a magazine article for Harper's in 1928, she had wondered why there was no American Gothic since such novelists as Ann Radcliffe, Jane Porter, and Charlotte Smith were so popular in this country.[8] In 1933 she had acknowledged that the Gothic tale might have a superficial place, but, she wondered, "Why do all mushrooms have to be toadstools?"[9] Another of her statements on the modern literary trend -- "The literature that crawls too long in the mire will lose at last the power of standing erect"[10] -- brought a gentle rejoinder from Lewis Gannett, then a New York Herald Tribune columnist, who reminded her of her own history of protest against the refusal to look at the raw truth of life. Her reply was, in part:

> For more years than I like to think of . . . I have battered my nerves against human cruelty. If I could believe that the present preoccupation with violence and obscenity springs, either in literature or in life, from compassion for suffering and a noble rage against social injustice, I should willingly offer thanks to any god ever invented, not excepting that strange deity worshipped by the Marquis de Sade.
>
> It is difficult, I admit, to separate certain aspects of moral indignation from the pursuit or exploitation of horror for its own sake. . . .
>
> I hope you are right and that the dark obsession is not sensationalism pure and simple, but "a fact of profound and hopeful significance." That is the encouraging view, and I should like to accept it. For you must admit that "to touch mire" is one thing, and "to crawl in slime" is another story. One may touch

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[7] Certain Measure, p. 69.

[8] Harper's, December, 1928, p. 93.

[9] Letters, p. 144.

[10] "Heroes and Monsters," p. 4.

> to destroy, but one crawls too long only for pleasure or profit.[11]

Thus, it is not precisely clear what lay in her mind behind her use of the word "Gothic." However, it can be assumed that she was outraged by horror, cruelty, violence, repulsiveness, and obscenity masquerading as realism and imposed for commercial purposes. Further, it appears that she had only a limited understanding of the original Gothic, which, she felt, represented merely a calculated appeal to emotion. Her narrow view of Gothicism did not allow her to see its influence on writers she admired and imitated or on her own work.

If she did not grasp intellectually the full significance of literary Gothic or the connection between Southern Gothic and the Gothic literary tradition, Ellen Glasgow nevertheless bears the marks of the Gothic influence. These marks derive from both historical and contemporary sources. Her concerns with Evil, Nature, and the inner man echo the concerns of eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothicists in Europe and America. The dark motifs, the tone of pessimism, and the mood of melancholy which undergird all she wrote are traceable to these same literary forebears as well as to the conditions and events that made up her own life experience.

Of the critics who have examined Ellen Glasgow's work over more than half a century, only a few have paid more than scant attention to the dark, or Gothic, quality in her work, confirming her own disassociation with the Gothic. Some of these have noted similarities with Faulkner, who is generally regarded as the chief exponent of Southern

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[11] Letters, pp. 188-89.

Gothic. Lewis Auchingloss says she was "the necessary bridge" between the Southern Romanticists and Faulkner, Porter, Welty, and Williams.[12] Frederick P. W. McDowell likewise feels that Glasgow stands "between the romanticism of the local color writers and the genteel realism of Howells or Mary Wilkins Freeman on the one hand, and the revolutionary naturalism of Theodore Dreiser and the psychological immediacy of Faulkner on the other hand."[13] William W. Kelly sees a kinship between Faulkner and Glasgow in both theme and subject: both deal with poor whites, degenerate aristocrats, and interracial lusts and conflicts, their difference being chiefly in method.[14] In the opinion of Blair Rouse, the similarity goes beyond characterization and the theme of aristocratic debility. He says both recognized the worth and weaknesses of aristocracy, were aware of the struggles of the lower class whites, and both condemned the waste of material values and the destruction of the human spirit. He adds: "If Ellen Glasgow spoke with more decorum, she spoke no less plainly, even violently, of the darker side of human existence."[15] Although McDowell believes Glasgow is closest to realists like Garland and Norris, in a brief study of the novel, The Deliverance, he observes that Christopher Blake's primitive passion creates a highly charged Gothic atmosphere,[16]

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[12]Ellen Glasgow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 46.

[13]Frederick P. W. McDowell, Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 234.

[14]Ellen Glasgow: A Bibliography (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1964), pp. xxix-xxx.

[15]Ellen Glasgow (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 141.

[16]"'The Old Pagan Scorn of Everlasting Mercy' - Ellen Glasgow's The Deliverance," Twentieth Century Literature, 4 (Jan. 1959), 138.

and he sees a forecast of Faulkner in The Deliverance, in Christopher Blake's efforts at atonement and in the theme of aristocratic debility.[17] He also believes the short story, "Jordan's End," anticipates Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury.[18]

Henry Seidel Canby and Dorothea Brande have noticed a certain dark quality and a sense of tragedy in Glasgow's work. Reviewing The Sheltered Life, Brande says it is a story of death and decay, the reading of which is like being under an evil enchantment.[19] Canby believes the essential quality of her work to be a sense of tender and ironic tragedy, and he defines that tragedy as "the waste of life through maladjustment of man to his environment and environment to its men."[20]

Only Richard Meeker and C. Hugh Holman have taken close looks at the Gothic characteristics in Ellen Glasgow's work. Richard Meeker calls attention to her use of the supernatural and other Gothic elements in a collected volume of her short stories, which he edited.[21] And C. Hugh Holman deals at length with Miss Glasgow's concerns with evil and the human soul, connecting her with other writers of the gloomy side of the sweetness-and-light, melancholy-and-dark dichotomy in Southern literature.[22]

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[17]McDowell, Ironic Art, pp. 69, 71.

[18]Ironic Art, p. 145.

[19]"Four Novels of the Month," Bookman, 75 (Aug. 1932), 405.

[20]"Ellen Glasgow: Ironic Tragedian," Saturday Review of Literature, 10 Sept. 1938, p. 14.

[21]The Collected Stories of Ellen Glasgow (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), pp. 8-12.

[22]"Ellen Glasgow and the Southern Literary Tradition," in Southern Writers: Appraisals in Our Time, ed. R. C. Simonini (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1964), pp. 113-16.

As noteworthy as these two studies are, both are limited. Meeker's is confined to the short stories, and Holman's concern is that of the literary historian and does not reflect intensive textual study.

It is not recorded if Ellen Glasgow ever read a Gothic novel, but it can be reasonably supposed that she did. The range of her reading, her fondness for the English novel, and her occasional references to Gothic writers all support this assumption. She reports in her autobiography that as a child she amused and educated herself with the novels of Sir Walter Scott.[23] Another sharp image from her childhood is the mental picture, obtained from her mother's account, of an aged relative, propped up in bed, reading Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho by candlelight. She transformed this recollection into a character in her novel The Battle-Ground.[24] She also records that she committed to memory a large amount of poetry when she was a child and that one of her favorites was Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard,"[25] the poem which was an early inspiration for the whole Gothic period in English literature.[26] The American authors Ellen Glasgow admired most were Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Poe.[27] Two of these, Hawthorne and Poe, were the artists who adapted Gothic materials to the study of the inner man.[28] The year before

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[23]The Woman Within (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1954), pp. 24, 38, 47.

[24]Certain Measure, p. 20.

[25]Woman Within, p. 47.

[26]Kenneth Clark, The Gothic Revival (New York: Scribner's, 1950), p. 28.

[27]Woman Within, p. 196.

[28]Cf. Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960). Here he notes that the best American writers --

she died she confided to Van Wyck Brooks that "I have always felt a curious (because an improbable) kinship with Poe, and your study of him moves me profoundly."[29] But even more specific evidence of her indebtedness to the Gothic tradition is her incorporation of Gothic conventions and themes into her own work: (1) her creation of melancholy moods and thoughts of darkness, death, and decay to involve the reader emotionally; (2) the thematic motif of the decayed mansion, a direct descendant of the Gothic image, the ruin; (3) her recurring theme which defines Evil as a part of Nature;[30] and (4) her idea of the Sovereignty of Nature.

Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Crane, Hemingway, and Faulkner -- have found the machinery of the Gothic novel suitable to express the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society (pp. xxii, 125). Because of the dominance of Gothic in American fiction, Fiedler calls it "a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (p. xxiv). It is, he says, of all Western literature the most deeply influenced by Gothic (pp. 124-25). American writers were somehow ready to respond to the psychic revolution of the Romantic Age which persuaded men that the final horrors are "neither gods nor demons but intimate aspects of our own minds" (p. xxxiv).

[29] Letters, p. 352.

[30] Gothicism was heavily concerned with Nature, especially its most awesome properties, often expressed in Gothic fiction by scenic backgrounds of gloom and foreboding, reflecting the dark and disturbed inner life of man, and by half-light and darkness, either twilight or night, occasionally pierced by moonlight or candle glow. These backgrounds are filled in with such ominous details as the presence of idiocy or madness or deformity, edifices covered with ivy and lichens, hovering birds of prey, rugged mountains, dark forests, tangled swamps, deep caves, fearful precipices, and torrents of water. Or the gloom is reinforced by an autumn setting with its suggestions of death and decay. The wild force of Nature is conveyed by perilous storms with howling blasts of wind, earth-trembling thunder, and lightning that shatters the sky. Imagery that makes a strong appeal to sight, sound, and smell is put into play. Tombs, burial vaults, flickering candles, and yellowed, mysterious manuscripts are visual elements. Calling forth fear and thoughts of death and decay are also the auditory effects of unearthly yells and stifled groans, tolling bells, and creaking hinges. Sulphurous fumes, or some other kind of foul odor, reminiscent of Dante's Inferno, bring the sense of smell into play. Supernatural effects include magic mirrors and other enchanted objects, stalking ghosts and demons, witches and sorcerers, bleeding statues and ancestral portraits that seem to come to life.

Apart from these literary influences, the time and place into which she was born, the makeup of her nature, and the events that occurred in her life contributed to the Gothic cast of her writing.

The context of Ellen Glasgow's life was not unlike the context of the lives of eighteenth century Gothic novelists in England. At that time the industrial revolution was taking place with its subsequent revision of the class order. The same thing was happening in the South in the early twentieth century. A society that had long been both agricultural and aristocratic was being re-shaped by industry and a rising middle class. Her own home in Richmond attests to this change. The handsome Georgian structure at One South Main Street, which she maintained until her death in 1945, stood as a lone survival of the charm and ideals of the past in the midst of a rapidly deteriorating neighborhood. But it is this very drama of the changing order that appealed to her, that led her to use Virginia material for her novels.[31]

Outwardly the Virginia author was witty and charming, according to the testimony of many who have been in her company, but, as she confesses in her autobiography, her inner nature was marked by conflict, pain, alienation, and nightmare. These experiences gave her a sense of oppressive evil at the heart of things,[32] which led to a resolve, dating from childhood, to "discover some meaning, some underlying reason for the mystery and pain of the world."[33] She believed that much of her inner

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[31] Certain Measure, p. 60.

[32] Woman Within, pp. 3, 4, 5, 25.

[33] Ibid., p. 73.

conflict came from the pull of opposites in her family heritage. The Glasgows were of Scotch-Irish descent, harsh Calvinists, given to metaphysical inquiry. They had settled the land in the foothills of Virginia. The Gholsons, on the other hand, were Tidewater aristocrats and Episcopalians -- tolerant, sensitive, and socially aware.[34]

Her early years were remembered by Ellen Glasgow as physically and spiritually tormenting. Confined and isolated from other children by constantly recurring headaches, she spent her solitude with the fairy tales and romances in the family library or wandering among the old tombstones in a nearby cemetery.[35] Before the age of twenty she had experienced both the anxieties of her mother's extended emotional illness and the painful onset of her own deafness, an affliction which was accompanied by morbid feelings and an intensified sense of alienation.[36] By the time she reached middle age, she had lost by death most of those closest to her, including a lover, the married man described in her autobiography as "Gerald B." She had even attempted suicide over a broken engagement to another man she called "Harold." But there was also a particular thread of terror that ran through the conflict, pain, and loss of her life. It began, she says, as her earliest remembered awareness:

> Moving forward and backward, as contented and as mindless as an amoeba, submerged in that vast fog of existence, I open my eyes and look up at the top windowpanes. Beyond the top windowpanes, in the midst of a red glow, I see a face without a body staring in at me, a vacant face, round, pallid, grotesque, malevolent. . . . How old I was

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[34]Rouse, Ellen Glasgow, p. 17

[35]Woman Within, p. 22.

[36]Ibid., p. 122.

> when I first saw that face without a body, I have never known. . . . But I do know that I, alone, saw the apparition, and that I saw it hanging there once, and forever. . . .[37]

Although scarcely noted by critics, the evidence exists that Glasgow's Gothicism was persistent enough and organic enough throughout her work to be a dominant characteristic of her style. What will be shown in the succeeding two chapters is how she demonstrated Gothic concerns and devices in the poems and short stories and how she enlarged these elements and used them in her novels to define Evil as existing in Nature and Nature as sovereign over man.

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[37] *Woman Within*, pp. 3, 5.

CHAPTER II

THE GOTHIC QUALITY IN GLASGOW'S POEMS AND SHORT STORIES

Before Ellen Glasgow reached the conclusion stated in her novels that Evil is not outside life but built into it, she had worked over the problem of Evil and the question of man's relationship to Nature in her poems and short stories. In their concern with Evil and man's inner nature and in their use of dark motifs, one finds the roots of her Gothicism, for both the poems and the short stories had been collected and published before the appearance of her most outstanding novels, a series of six, beginning with the publication in 1925 of Barren Ground.[38]

The poems show an early attempt to define Evil as well as a facility with macabre imagery. One reviewer of the Glasgow poetry wondered if her concern with the darker aspects of life was a statement of her view of life or an attempt at emotional effect.[39] It was probably both, since she needed to arouse feeling, to shock, as part of her revolt to realism, part of her continuing statement that Evil is inherent in existence. For in her experience, beginning with her earliest moments of awareness, Evil was more vivid than any other reality.

In her personal life, by the time the poems of The Freeman were published, she had already suffered the isolation of a sickly childhood,

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[38] The Freeman and Other Poems, a slender volume containing twenty-seven pieces, was published in 1902, only five years after her career as a professional writer had been launched with the publication of a novel, and eleven short stories were collected and published in 1923 under the title The Shadowy Third and Other Stories.

[39] World's Work (Nov. 1902), 2792.

the beginning of deafness, the deaths of her beloved mother and a favorite brother, and she had fallen in love with a man she could never marry. Moreover, most of the poems were written during her troubled youth, when she was struggling against the current to become a writer. She was grappling with many radical ideas, and she was in rebellion not only from the prevailing sentimentality in Southern fiction but also from what was expected of her as a Virginia gentlewoman.

The published poems, some of which appeared separately after the 1902 collection, can be divided into two groups: those which express her concept of Good and Evil and those which demonstrate her technique with Gothic moods and motifs. In the first group are poems asserting the existence of various kinds of spiritual reality which represent Good: the communion of all life, the redemptive value and immortality of love, and the permanence of art. In contrast, are the poems treating the pain, loss, and suffering of life, such as "A Prayer" (p. 18)[40] where life is described as "the appointed path," which contains blows, bondage, and imprisonment and "The Vision of Hell" (pp. 44-46) which depicts Hell as life on earth seen by one who has died and passed into eternal space and is looking back:

> I saw those mortal shadows stumble on,
> Rising in anguish, passing in a breath,
> Blind atoms, treading their predestined doom
> From birth to death. (p. 44)

In the second group are poems done in the Gothic manner of Poe, which because of their heavy reliance on the imagery of death arouse the

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[40]All page numbers for the poems refer to The Freeman and Other Poems (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1902).

feelings of melancholy and terror. Some of the poems use death as a theme which is explored and drawn in detail to better approach the meaning of its opposite, life. Thus, the life and death contrast affords an opportunity to the poet to introduce the juxtaposition of other opposites -- light and dark, sun and shade -- for effects that she afterward develops into structural motifs in her novels.

The title poem of The Freeman (pp. 13-14) constructs a melancholy mood with images of imprisonment, of torture, of battle, of autumn and its associations with sorrow and death. The poem, "Fame," (p. 20) uses death imagery such as dust, ashes, a coffin and a skull to deplore the injustice of one's receiving no acknowledgement until after he is dead. Words such as "dust," "grave-clothes," "lament," and "rotting tomb" are used to draw the death imagery in the poem, "Resurrection," (p. 21) which depicts death as peace into which resurrection intrudes. In the poem, "Justice," (p. 25) the ingredients of Hell are added to those of death -- brands of fire, curse of God, tears -- to suggest that Good may at times be persecuted. The battlefield is re-created in even more vivid terms in the poem, "War" (p. 31). The macabre details include bloodstains, red dust, reeking sod, the ashes of a home, and swarming vultures to underscore the poet's point about the incongruity of war's bloodletting and the prayers to God in thanksgiving for victory. "Aridity" (p. 33) describes the death-in-life situation, the desert in the heart, of a woman. Adjectives like "pallid," "sickly," "arid," "bloodless," "slimy," "colorless," and "stillborn" are employed. Even the eternal symbol of renewed hope, the rising sun, is seen as something which smites the woman. Using images of a vacant room, ashes, and a corpse, Miss Glasgow

meditates in "Love Has Passed Along the Way" (p. 35) on the transitory nature of love, its absence being equated with emptiness, cold darkness, and death. In "Coward Memory" (p. 28) Miss Glasgow uses the imagery of dead leaves, lichened walls, dying violets, and a pall in the atmosphere to construct a melancholy background for her statement that memory does not dare go back to certain things. Skeletons with toothless jaws, dust, and ashes surround the idea in the poem "The Hunter" (pp. 55-56) that life is the search for truth which is pursued in the daylight world as well as in the tomb, the house of Eternal Mysteries. Death provides the substance as well as the form for the poem, "Death-in-Life" (pp. 47-49) in which Death comes as a corpse from a church vault, wearing a shroud with ashen face, unfleshed fingers, and the scent of mold. She appears during a storm at a house where the man takes her in and makes her his bride, only to hear her say she is not Death but Life. Another attempt to depict and define death is made in the poem, "The Shadow" (pp. 22-24), which links love and death in an even more vivid way. Life is seen as a journey during which death is in constant pursuit until, if caution is relaxed, one will be finally caught and ravished as if by a lover. Again, the poem, "The Traveller" (pp. 16-17) grapples with the idea of life as a journey into darkness, isolation, terror, and death. Present is the expected imagery of the open grave, dead faces, dead voices, but also something more. The theme of life and death suggests other contrasts which exist side by side: light and dark, hot and cold. The storm clouds are drawn against the snow; there is the warmth of the fire inside and the cold of the snow outside. Here the imagery not only sets a mood but reinforces the idea of the juxtaposition of opposites. Here also is

another view of Nature to be noted for later reference: Nature not as cosmic oneness or serene strength, as in other poems, but Nature as threatening wildness, suggested by baying wolves and stormy blasts.

The poems of Ellen Glasgow are early insights to her thinking, showing her sensitivity to Evil and her melancholy mood, which were fused to form a quality identifiable in her novels as "Gothic." Written generally earlier than the short stories and before a majority of the novels covered by this study, they represent a groping through forms and ideas to the full artistic development found in her novels of the device of using Gothic elements to support Gothic theme.

Ellen Glasgow's short stories -- specifically a group of five -- likewise show her awareness of the presence and persistence of Evil. They also reveal the author's interest in man's inner workings -- his feelings, his motivations, but especially the force of his will. From the poems to the short stories, the emphasis shifts from the macabre to the supernatural, from the meaning of death and the nature of the cosmos to the nature of man and the power of his mind.

Of the five Gothic short stories, three -- "Jordan's End," "Dare's Gift," and "Whispering Leaves" -- are set in Virginia and focus on decaying or defaced houses whose names give titles to the stories. The other two -- "The Shadowy Third" and "The Past" -- concern houses in New York which are haunted by ghosts. Around the time she was writing about haunted houses, she referred to her own home at One West Main Street in Richmond as being ghost-ridden.[41]

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[41] Woman Within, p. 222. It has been reported that the house is still haunted. A 1968 news story revealed claims that some have seen the

All of the stories in the Gothic group were written between 1916 and 1923, a period Miss Glasgow called her "Slough of Despond." Because of several private and public disillusionments, she found it difficult in these years to hold on to her sense of the evolution of a story, to trace the causes and effects that so fascinated her, to sustain the creative force needed to write novels.[42] Each of the stories is told in the first person by a narrator who comes onto the scene as an outsider, either as a newly hired nurse or secretary, or a long lost cousin, or a new tenant in an old house, or a new doctor in the community.

The power of the mind or the will is explored in three ghost stories: "The Shadowy Third," "The Past," and "Whispering Leaves." In "The Shadowy Third" the narrator is a nurse hired by the famous surgeon, Dr. Maradick, to attend his wife who is ill with a nervous disorder. The doctor's wife had been a wealthy widow with a young daughter when he married her about a year earlier. Her illness is that she has a hallucination that the daughter who died several months before is still alive. The nurse, too, had seen the child, dressed in Scotch plaid with a red ribbon in her hair, when she first arrived at the old house on lower Fifth Avenue. Before Mrs. Maradick is sent to an asylum, she confides to the nurse that her husband killed the little girl because he wanted her money. The nurse observes the mother, on the day she leaves, embracing her child, but the others do not see. She says: "I have asked myself

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ghost of Ellen Glasgow herself in the garden doorway or on the main staircase; others have heard the clicking of typewriter keys where there were none. See Gloria Galloway, "Tap-Tap, Whooo - Spooks Spin Tonight," Richmond Times Dispatch, October 31, 1968, Sect. D, p. 1.

[42] Letters, p. 69.

since if the power of sympathy enabled me to penetrate the web of material fact and see the spiritual form of the child. . ." (p. 67).[43] The nurse stays in the house to work for Dr. Maradick, and as she does not see the child again, she begins to wonder if the vision has been an optical illusion. A year later, after the death of his wife, when the doctor is planning to marry a former fiancee who had once rejected him because he was not rich enough, the nurse sees the child again, skipping rope in the garden. That night an emergency summons the doctor to the hospital. As he hurries down the stairs, he trips over a child's jump rope, falls, and is killed. In this story the ghost of the dead child is seen by only three people: the old Negro family retainer, the sweet and gentle Mrs. Maradick, and the sympathetic nurse. It is a "power of sympathy" in the minds of these three sensitive souls which induces the presence of the little girl. The ghost of the child in Scotch plaid is, therefore, not the inexplicable ghost of the haunted castle but the very American-style Gothic ghost which is an uncanny manifestation of a sensitive and sympathetic living mind.

Another house on Fifth Avenue is the scene of a second ghost story, "The Past." The story is told by a new secretary hired by Mrs. Vanderbridge: "I had no sooner entered the house than I knew something was wrong. . . . I had a suspicion from the first that the magnificence covered a secret disturbance" (p. 119). The secretary, Miss Wrenn, has hardly arrived when the maid informs her that some unknown harm threatens Mrs. Vanderbridge: "You can come between her and harm - if you see it" (p. 123). At dinner

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[43]All page numbers for short story excerpts refer to The Collected Short Stories of Ellen Glasgow, Richard K. Meeker, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963).

that evening she does see it, although she does not then realize what it is. The figure of a woman, dressed in grey of a misty texture and color, joins Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbridge at the table. Strangely, she eats nothing, says nothing, and is ignored by both of them. Eventually the maid explains that the ghost is a manifestation of Mr. Vanderbridge's guilt that it was he who caused the death of his first wife. Later Mr. Vanderbridge adds: "She is his thought of her - but he doesn't know that she is visible to the rest of us . . . . That is the only way she comes back -- the only way she has the power to come back -- as a thought" (p. 132). Subsequently the secretary asks Mrs. Vanderbridge: "Then you feel that she is really there? That she exists outside of his mind?" Mrs. Vanderbridge replies: "How can I tell? What do any of us know of the world beyond? She exists as much as I exist to you or you to me. Isn't thought all that there is -- all that we know?" (p. 133) The discovery of a packet of love letters hidden in an old desk and obviously written by another man to the first Mrs. Vanderbridge gives the second Mrs. Vanderbridge an opportunity to make her husband think differently of his former wife. Instead she chooses another way. Confronting the ghost, which was a "malignant will veiled by that thin figure . . . a spiral of grey smoke covering a sinister purpose" (p. 138), she says she will no longer fight for her husband but will give up what does not really belong to her.

> There was a light about her that was almost unearthly - the light of triumph. The radiance of it blinded me for an instant. It was like a flame, clearing the atmosphere of all that was evil, of all that was poisonous and deadly. She was looking directly at the phantom, and there was no hate in her voice - there was only a great pity, a great sorrow and sweetness. * * * Not until afterwards did I realize that it was the victory of good over evil. (p. 138)

The principal characters of this story are clearly Gothic types: the dark, haunted soul who is Roger Vanderbridge -- his face had "sadness . . . haunting beauty . . . rich darkness of colouring" (p. 122); the Dark Lady who is the personification of Evil in the ghost of the first Mrs. Vanderbridge; and the Fair Maiden, who is the second Mrs. Vanderbridge, the incarnation of light and goodness. Here, too, is a personification of the light-dark contrast used in some of her poems. Thus, the Gothic quality of "The Past" lies in the characterizations, in the evocation of a sense of horror within the Vanderbridge household, and in the ghostly presence which is, like the phantom of the little girl in "The Shadowy Third," the creation of minds that are sensitive.

The story, "Whispering Leaves," also contains a ghost. Whispering Leaves is the name of Pelham Blanton's family home in Virginia, a house of red brick with peeling white stucco. The eaves droop, the steps are worn, the floor boards are loose, and the furniture is dropping to pieces from lack of care. Outside the fields are desolate, the fences are rotting, and there are an unnatural number of birds. The scene is described by a cousin of Pelham's who comes from the North for a visit, arriving in the twilight of a spring evening:

> I was conscious again of a deep intuitive feeling that the world in which I moved was as unreal as the surroundings in a dream. Dreamlike, too, were my own sensations as I passed into that greenish twilight which shut out the light of the afterglow. (p. 147)

On the trip from the train to the house she discovers that no black servants will stay at Whispering Leaves after dark. She also meets Pell, the child of Pelham Blanton's first wife who dies when he was born. She observes that he is caught, as he falls from the top of a tree, by a Negro mammy wearing a red turban. Later she discovers that Pell has no

Negro mammy although he had one, Mammy Rhody, who died two years earlier. Furthermore, no one else had seen a Negro woman catch Pell when he fell from the tree. She is told that Mammy Rhody had promised Pell's mother she would look after Pell as long as she lived. After the visiting cousin befriends Pell, he tells her that he believes Mammy Rhody is still alive, that she still takes care of him. Then one night the house burns, and as the family gathers on the lawn, it is noticed that Pell is missing. Through the flames the cousin can see the tall Negress with the red turban carrying Pell to safety.

> Even the unperceiving eyes about me, though they could only see material things, knew that Pell had come unharmed out of the fire. To them it was merely a shadow, a veil of smoke, which surrounded him. I alone saw the dark arms that enfolded him. (p. 163)

Here, as in the other stories, the ghost can be seen only by those with unusual perception: the primitive black people, the child, and the sympathetic cousin. The coarse, comfort-loving natures of Pelham and the rest of his family, neglectful of the ancestral home and the lovely gardens, are unresponsive. The presence of Nature's bounty -- the swarming birds and the luxuriant growth in the untended garden -- alongside the decay of man's handiwork, suggests the Gothic idea of Nature's sovereignty over man.

The ghosts in the two New York stories were creations of the minds of living people. Mammy Rhody's ghost was born of her own will, her determination to keep her pledge of loyalty to Pell and his mother. Another pledge of loyalty is responsible for the persistence of a malevolent spirit, not in human form, but as an idea which saturates the walls of a house, in the story, "Dare's Gift." The house by the same name was one

of the charming old homes along the James River in Virginia. Mr. Beckwith's first view of it worked like a magic spell, we are told. It seems in flawless condition even though closer inspection later reveals crude and careless repair work and additions. Nevertheless, Mr. Beckwith succeeds in renting the house from the owner, a man who is frank to say his associations with the house have been most unpleasant. In the beginning, Mr. Beckwith, as the narrator, establishes the air of mystery:

> Even after a year the events of Dare's Gift are not things I can talk over with Mildred; and, for my part, the occurrence remains, like the house in its grove of cedars, wrapped in an impenetrable mystery. I don't in the least pretend to know how or why the thing happened. I only know that it did happen — that it happened, word for word as I record it. (pp. 96-97)

Beckwith, a lawyer heavily involved with a case in Washington, rents Dare's Gift as a quiet retreat for his wife, Mildred, who suffers from a nervous disorder. After a time spent at Dare's Gift, Mildred inexplicably ruins a case her husband is working on by revealing scandalous information about his client to the press. She tells him she had to do it and would do it again. Beckwith, realizing her mind is unhinged, calls in a local physician, Dr. Lakeby, who has an explanation for Mildred's strange behavior:

> They all succumb to it — the neurotic temperament soonest, the phlegmatic one later — but they all succumb to it in the end. The spirit of the place is too strong for them. They surrender to the thought of the house — to the psychic force of its memories . . . . Did you ever stop to wonder about the thoughts that must have gathered within walls like these? — to wonder about the impressions that must have lodged in the bricks, in the crevices, in the timber and the masonry? Have you ever stopped to think that these multiplied impressions might create a current of thought — a mental atmosphere — an inscrutable power of suggestion? . . . The house is saturated with a thought. It is haunted by treachery. . . . The house is a shell,

> and if one listens long enough one can hear in its heart
> the low murmur of the past. . . ." (pp. 104-05)

The treachery of the past to which Dr. Lakeby refers occurred at the end of the Civil War when the Dares, Lucy and her father, Colonel Dare, still lived in Dare's Gift. Both of them were fanatically devoted to the cause of the Confederacy. Colonel Dare is likened to an animal with his claw-like hand and eyes of a "peculiar burning blackness, like the eyes of some small enraged animal" (p. 110). Dr. Lakeby describes Lucy as being "ethereal as a saint" (p. 107) and as "like a shadow, a phantom, that attains in one supreme instant, by one immortal gesture, union with reality" (p. 112). What she did was reveal the hiding place of her former lover, a Yankee soldier, in the belief that his escape would mean defeat for the South, although, in fact, this was already in the making, Lee's surrender being only three weeks away. She betrayed not only the soldier but the ancient code that puts personal loyalty above loyalty to the state. She is Antigone in reverse. As Dr. Lakeby puts it: "The act dies; it decays like the body, but the idea is immortal" (p. 105). Lucy Dare, he said, "created in the horror of that hour an unseen environment more real, because more spiritual, than the material fact of the house" (p. 106). It was this environment, then, that led Mildred to betray her husband's confidence.

The short story in which Miss Glasgow achieved her most skillful blend of mood and theme, is also the most Gothic of all. "Jordan's End" was published for the first time in The Shadowy Third collection of 1923. It may have been the last she wrote before devoting herself exclusively to the writing of novels. The story abounds with Gothic atmosphere and Gothic elements supporting a Gothic theme, the deadly influence of the

past, manifest in the Jordan family curse. It shows the blending of these ingredients which became an outstanding feature of her novels. The narrator is the doctor who has been summoned to Jordan's End. His melancholy journey to the house through the lonely countryside where "surrounding desolation brooded there like some sinister influence" (p. 206), takes the doctor past a dead tree in whose bare branches buzzards roost, past piles of dead, rotting leaves and crushed decaying apples. He is directed to the house by Father Peterkin, a grotesque dwarfed figure. The Jordans, once an aristocratic family, are now described as having gone to seed (p. 205). The decaying house is infested by rats and birds, its roof shingles have rotted, the eaves are falling, the shutters are sagging on broken hinges, and broken window panes are stuffed with cloth. It is a raw, chill day under a grey autumn twilight. The doctor describes his sensations:

> . . . a chill depression seemed to emanate from the November woods. As we drove on, I remembered grim tales of enchanted forests filled with evil faces and whispering voices. The scents of wood earth and rotting leaves invaded my brain like a magic spell. On either side the forest was as still as death. (p. 206)

The mood is thus set as a backdrop for the discovery of the underlying horror of the story -- that there is a Jordan family curse, the curse of insanity. The grandfather and two uncles have already been sent to an asylum leaving in the household three women -- grandmother and two aunts, hovering over the scene in their black dresses suggestive of three mythical witches -- young Alan Jordan, his wife Judith, and their small son. And now Alan has fallen a victim of the curse. This is why the doctor has been called. He finds Alan, attended by two young black men, sitting in a wing chair before the fire, plaiting and unplaiting the fringe of a

shawl, just as his father had done for twenty years. Judith is described as having a certain unreality, as if she belonged to legend or allegory; her face and flesh are luminous, suggesting an inward light, a spiritual beauty (p. 207); her voice puts one in mind of organ music and stained glass (p. 208). A prominent alienist, Dr. Carstairs, is to come the next day from Washington, but the local doctor leaves an opiate with Judith Jordan in order to ensure a peaceful night for her husband. The next morning the two doctors confer at the train station; Carstairs has determined that the case is hopeless. Immediately, the local doctor sets out again for Jordan's End. By the time he arrives, Alan Jordan is dead. And the bottle of medicine he has given Judith is empty. But he does not mention this to her. Even after it is suggested that the Jordan family curse of insanity is not imposed by a malevolent deity but is brought on by a kind of family pride, the habit of inbreeding, we are left to wonder whether or not the ethereal Judith deliberately brought on her husband's death with an overdose of drugs. The scene is as bleak in the end as it was in the beginning. Judith is left to await the deaths of the three old women and the inevitable insanity of her son.

> . . . the leaves were piled in long mounds like double graves. . . . The air was so still that the whole place might have been in a trance or asleep. Not a branch moved, not a leaf rustled on the ground, not a sparrow twittered in the ivy; and even the few sheep stood motionless, as if they were under a spell. . . . Nothing moved on the earth, but high above, under the leaden clouds, a buzzard was sailing. (p. 215)

The decay of the Jordan family -- Jordan's end, so to speak -- is reflected and re-inforced by the dilapidation of the ancestral home, named, ironically, Jordan's End. In this device, Miss Glasgow repeats Poe's double meaning in the title of his short story about the decay of

a family and the collapse of their house, "The Fall of the House of Usher." In both stories human ruin is seen as the result of something internal: aristocratic pride, inbreeding, isolation.

All of these Gothic short stories can be seen as studies of the powers of the mind, the force of its sympathy and sensitivity as well as the impact of the will, whether it occurs as a pledge of loyalty to a person, to a cause, or to a conviction such as the one that led the Jordans to marry one another. They, thus, follow the tradition of psychological probing in American Gothic which was begun by Charles Brockden Brown, continued by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, and sustained in the twentieth century by Ellen Glasgow and others of the Southern Literary Renaissance. Unlike her novels, the short stories show the mind, a part of man's inner nature, as a dominant force and a power for good. The novels focus on quite a different aspect of the human interior.

CHAPTER III

THE GOTHIC QUALITY IN GLASGOW'S NOVELS

The task of identifying Glasgow's themes in her novels has resulted in almost as many interpretations as interpreters. The Literary History of the United States says her two main themes are "the endeavor to survive and renew an exhausted land" and the struggle to preserve spiritual ideals in a materialistic setting.[44] Blair Rouse finds her main theme to be growth and decay in a changing social order.[45] Joan Santas interprets Glasgow's theme as the power of individual character over social chaos.[46] Others see her theme as the conflict of agrarian and industrial regimes.[47] But McDowell comes closest to seeing what she herself pointed to as the principal, continuing theme of her novels. He says she had a concern with the invisible forces within man and beyond him.[48] Even in her comedies of manners, he points out, she showed a "sense of fracture between surface pleasantry and barely acknowledged submerged forces operating in society and human nature."[49]

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[44]London: The Macmillan Co., 1963, pp. 1216-17.

[45]Ellen Glasgow, p. 115.

[46]Ellen Glasgow's American Dream (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1965), p. 12.

[47]Van Wyck Brooks and Otto L. Bettmann, Our Literary Heritage (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1952), pp. 216-17 and C. Hugh Holman, Three Modes of Southern Fiction (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966), p. 19.

[48]Ironic Art, p. 16.

[49]Ibid., p. 184.

Ellen Glasgow recorded in her autobiography that she had determined when she wrote her first novel that she would "write of all the harsher realities beneath manners, beneath social customs, beneath the poetry of the past, and the romantic nostalgia of the present."[50] Many years later, writing about her personal philosophy, she identified one of these harsher realities as a deep destructive instinct in man. She said that the "most tragic figure in modern society is the truly civilized man who has been thrust back upon the level of Neanderthal impulses."[51] Commenting on her final novel, she said that its theme welded together all the themes of her earlier works,[52] and she defined that major thread as "the conflict of human beings with human nature, of civilization with biology."[53]

To show how this idea, which I call Nature's sovereignty over man through the passions, is accompanied and reinforced by another, that Nature is sovereign also through its forces, and how both are presented in the Gothic manner is the task of this chapter. Thirteen novels — the twelve she chose for Scribner's Virginia Edition of 1938, plus the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1941 novel, In This Our Life — will be examined in chronological order.

The Voice of the People (1900)

In this, one of her earliest novels, Ellen Glasgow is already using the Gothic touches which became characteristic of her work. While

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[50] Woman Within, p. 98.

[51] I Believe, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), pp. 106-07.

[52] Woman Within, p. 286.

[53] Certain Measure, p. 250.

the major idea here is the decay of the aristocratic social structure in Virginia, another idea, the suggestion that Evil lies buried within the nature of man, makes a small but significant appearance.

In this story Nicholas Burr and Eugenia Battle grow up on neighboring farms, but they are worlds apart in the social hierarchy of their time and place. Nevertheless they fall in love, and their devotion might have bridged the gap but for a false accusation of Nicholas which Eugenia believed. The cruel injustice of being blamed for something he did not do and Eugenia's failure to believe in his innocence enraged Nicholas, and his passion altered his countenance in a way that repelled Eugenia:

> . . . she saw the convulsed features, the furrow that cleft the forehead like a seam, the heavy brows bent above the half-closed eyes, the spasmodic working of the drawn mouth. She saw the man in whom, for its brief instant, evil was triumphant; in whom that self-poise, which had been to her the secret of his strength, was tumultuously overthrown. (p. 216)[54]

As Nature's passion overwhelms Nicholas in this scene, Nature's forces offer further evidence of her sovereignty. There is an autumn sunset, with a single star lighting the sky, suggesting darkness. Dry leaves whirl around them (pp. 210-11), and smells of autumnal decay -- the reek of rotting logs and the effluvium of dead flowers -- surround them (pp. 220-21).

There are other Gothic touches as well. The forest of Nicholas' boyhood, with its carpet of rotting leaves and ghostly beech trees, is said by the Negroes to be haunted. Many told of meeting ghosts there (p. 27). However, the boy was more intimidated by the stately and severe

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[54]All page references to the novels are directed to the Virginia Edition of 1938 with the exception of those to In This Our Life, which are to the Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1941 edition.

ancestral portraits in Judge Bassett's house than by the threat of ghosts. To him the Bassett forebears seem to be actually in the room (pp. 7-8). Portraits that seem to be alive is a Gothic device used by Ellen Glasgow to sound her sub-theme, the influence of the past. Another sub-theme, aristocratic debility, is introduced as Nicholas, now Governor of Virginia, returns to his home-place and also visits the now-empty and deteriorating Battle Hall. He finds the former symbol of aristocratic grace wreathed in Virginia creepers, its shutters hanging loose on their hinges (p. 372).

The Battle-Ground (1902)

Two years later Ellen Glasgow's novel with the Civil War setting, The Battle-Ground, was published. Lightly touched with the Gothic quality, it is the story of two neighboring families, the Amblers and the Montjoys, in the hill country of Virginia and their differing approaches to the politics of the Confederacy and their responses to what happens to them.

The idea of animal passion is brought out briefly in Dan Montjoy's experience on the battlefield:

> As he bent to fire, the fury of the game swept over him and aroused the sleeping brute within him. All the primeval instincts, throttled by the restraint of centuries -- the instincts of blood-guiltiness, of hot pursuit, of fierce delight, of the death grapple with a resisting foe -- these awoke suddenly to life and turned the battle scarlet to his eyes. (p. 271)

There is also the story of a conjurer, old Aunt Ainsley, who is said to have conjured the tails off sheep. Betty Ambler, stung by the teasing of the neighborhood boys about her red hair, goes to Aunt Ainsley to have her hair conjured coal black. The ancient Negro woman tells her to wrap a hank of her hair around the hind foot of a he-frog and on the night of the full moon, when the devil is said to go courting, to hide

it under a rock in the big road where the devil is sure to find it and breathe his flames on it causing it to burn black (pp. 10-13). The scene of Betty's attempt to work Aunt Ainsley's black magic is told with Gothic flavor (p. 24). The great hall of her house appears to Betty in the darkness like a cavern. The floor boards creak, and the iron chain of the front door rattles. The columns of the portico look grim and ghostly and "the shadows crawled under her bare feet like living things" and seemed like "an encamped army of grotesques" (p. 24). Suddenly Betty is terror-stricken by the thud of footsteps coming along the road. It turns out to be, not the devil, but the boy Dan Montjoy whom she grows up to love and marry.

The Deliverance (1904)

This novel, depicting the harshness and bitterness of a changing social order in the post-war South, dramatizes a human soul engulfed in the passion of revenge. As the story makes use of Glasgow's sub-themes -- aristocratic debility, the effect of soil upon soul, and the influence of the past -- as well as the passions and forces of Nature and a number of Gothic elements, it is the first of her works to use Gothic elements extensively.

Christopher Blake's hatred for Bill Fletcher, his father's former overseer who cheated his employer and then took advantage of him to obtain the estate owned by the family for generations, actually transforms his appearance:

> His voice, for all the laughter, sounded brutal, and Carraway, gazing at him in wonder, saw his face grow suddenly lustful like that of an evil deity. The beauty was still there, blackened and distorted, a

> beauty that he felt to be more sinister than ugliness. The lawyer was in the presence of a great naked passion, and involuntarily he lowered his eyes. (pp. 69-70)

Christopher is not unaware of the feelings which move him. Lying in the cemetery, on his father's grave, he probes his inner nature:

> His god was a pagan god, terrible rather than tender, and there burned within his heart the old pagan scorn of everlasting mercy. There were moods even when he felt the kinship with his savage forefathers working in his blood, and at such times he liked to fit heroic tortures to heroic crimes, to imagine the lighted stake and his enemy amid the flames. (p. 76)

Later he recognizes that the feeling has become a force driving him onward toward final vengeance:

> At the moment he felt like a man who, being bound upon a wheel, is whirled so rapidly round that he is dazed by the continuous revolutions. What did it all mean, anyway -- the boy, Fletcher, himself, and the revenge that he now saw so clearly before him? Was it a great divine judgment or a great human cruelty?
>
> Question as he would, the wheel still turned, and he knew that, for good or evil, he was bound upon it until the end. (p. 187)

Christopher's passion finally spends itself in the ruination of Fletcher's grandson, which leads the young man to murder his grandfather. For his evil-doing, Christopher does penance by confessing to the murder and serving time in prison until released by Will Fletcher's dying confession.

The sub-theme of aristocratic debility stresses the failure of the planter class to sustain itself atop the southern social hierarchy and has its usual accompaniment, the decayed house. Blake Hall is presented to the reader initially in a twilight view. The visiting lawyer, Carraway, notes the closed shutters and their rusty hinges, and on the inside the crude furnishings and the marks on the wall where the Blake ancestral portraits had hung.

> In the scented dusk, Carraway stared about the desolate, crudely furnished room, which reflected to his troubled fancy the face of a pitiable, dishonoured corpse. The soul of it was gone for ever - that peculiar spirit of place which makes every old house the guardian of an inner life. What remained was but the outer husk, the disfigured frame, upon which the newer imprint left no more than a passing indignity. (p. 14)

Just as the castle in the early Gothic novel seemed a living thing, affecting the lives of people who came into contact with it, the land in The Deliverance is presented as a force equal to a character in the story. Thus is set up the sub-theme, the effect of soil upon soul. The land is central to Blake's redemption after he has corrupted Bill Fletcher's beloved grandson and gone to prison for his murder. This is how Miss Glasgow describes his first morning at home after his release from prison:

> With the first sunlight he awoke, and slipping noiselessly into his clothes, went out for a daylight view of the country that had dwelt for so long a happy vision in his thoughts. The dew was thick on the grass, and crossing to the old bench, he sat down in the pale sunshine beside the damask rosebush, on which a single flower blossomed out of season. Beyond the cedars in the graveyard the sunrise flamed golden upon a violet background, and across the field of life-everlasting there ran a sparkling path of fire. The air was strong with autumn scents; and as he drank it in with deep draughts it seemed to him that he began to breathe anew the spirit of life. (pp. 456-67)

The family graveyard mentioned in the above passage is the image which injects the sub-theme, the influence of the past. This world of shades was for Christopher Blake a city of refuge, a place of reverie. The wall separating the graves from the cultivated fields is overgrown with moss and poison ivy, and the stone slabs are stained and covered with dust and mould, but it is here, among the bones of his ancestors,

that Blake commits himself to vengeance for Fletcher's usurpation of his ancestral property and his dreams.

An added Gothic flavor is given by the presence in the story of insanity and deformity. Christopher's sister, Cynthia, is described as having "misshapen features," as appearing "grotesque" (p. 39). The end of the war had brought madness to his father, who was kept until his death in closed rooms on the north side of the house (p. 78). And it brought blindness, both visual and mental, to his mother, who lived a kind of death-in-life the rest of her years, unaware that the war had ended in defeat, that her home was lost and her family impoverished. Her children kept up a subterfuge that all was as it had been. Moreover, the war had maimed Uncle Tucker, leaving him only one leg to hobble about on. Once Miss Glasgow describes Uncle Tucker's shadow as protruding "like a grotesque from early Gothic art" (p. 170). The same quality occurs in a view of Fletcher:

> . . . illuminated by the trembling flame, she saw the face of Fletcher, hairy, bloated, sinister, with the shadow of evil impulses worked into the mouth and eyes . . . . He reminded her vaguely of some hideous gargoyle she had seen hanging from an early Gothic cathedral. (p. 420)

The Romance of a Plain Man (1909)

The next novel in the sequence of time has scant Gothic material. Although it is, like many other Glasgow novels, concerned with changing economic and social structures and their consequences, the emphasis here is not on the demise of the aristocratic order but on Ben Starr's rise from a lower middle class position to a place of power in business as the protege of General Bolingbroke, president of the Great South Midland and

Atlantic Railroad, and to a limited aristocratic status as the husband of Sally Mickleborough.

The Gothic elements in this book are used merely as artistic reinforcement. The book begins with an October storm raging in the background as two children, the low-born Ben and the high-born Sally, first meet. After that, despite the differences in their backgrounds, the two children continue to meet occasionally. Sometimes they play in the cemetery on Old Church Hill, amusing themselves by making miniature graves (p. 3). Again, they play in the garden of the house where Sally and her mother live, a kind of enchanted place, behind a high wall where ghosts are said to walk (p. 54). This garden of fantasy forms a kind of hub for the plot, as a place where the two children play, where they later become engaged, and much later, where they come to rent rooms after the garden is ruined and the house has become dilapidated, and after Ben's first fortune has been lost. Thin though the Gothic quality may be this book stresses the idea of aristocratic debility through the images of the decayed mansion and the overgrown garden.

The Miller of Old Church (1911)

Here is a Glasgow novel, like The Deliverance, which is dominated, not merely highlighted, by the idea of Nature's sovereignty as manifested in passions and forces. Two sub-themes, aristocratic debility and the influence of the past, are also present.

In The Miller of Old Church the power of the inborn nature, consisting of the passions of desire and hate, is shown to dominate man's adoptive nature, reason. Abel Revercomb realizes that his love for Molly has no chance for fulfillment, but he cannot forget her.

> His mind seemed to have as much control over the passion that raged in his heart as an admonishing apostle of peace has over a mob that is headed toward destruction. (p. 262)

It is the same with Judy Revercomb when she realizes that Mr. Mullen, the preacher she has long adored, is going away for good.

> The woman in her was very primitive -- a creature that harked back to the raw sensations of the jungle . . . (p. 395). Like all helpless victims of great emotions, she had become the vehicle of some impersonal destructive force in nature. It was not Judy, but the passion within her that was speaking through her lips. (pp. 395-96)

Again, Molly's hatred of Jonathan Gay for the bastardy his uncle inflicted on her and the heartbreak he gave her mother gives her an animal look.

> How she hated him and, by Jove, how she <u>could</u> hate! She reminded him of a little wild brown animal as she stood there with her teeth showing between her parted red lips and her eyes flashing defiance. (p. 33)

Aristocratic debility and decay are suggested by a mansion, which is not what it once was. At the time the book begins, Jonathan Gay is returning to his home, Jordan's Journey, which is said to be haunted by its original owners, the Jordans, as well as by his mysterious uncle, Jonathan Gay, the elder, who had purchased the house from the Jordans after the Civil War. On his approach he sees bats wheeling over the ivied roof of the house.

> There was no smoke in the chimneys, and the square old house, with its hooded roof and its vacant windows, assumed a sinister and inhospitable look against the background of oaks. (p. 29)

The scene is enhanced by "the sharp autumn scent of the rotting mould under the trees" (p. 56). Signs of decay are, in fact, everywhere. The country-side with its sunken roads and abandoned fields "looked as if man, having contended here unsuccessfully with nature, had signed an

ignominious truce beneath the crumbling gateposts of the turnpike" (p. 5). The first structure pointed out in the novel is a small public house known as Bottom's Ordinary. A building which has declined through several generations from a chapel to a tavern, it is described as dilapidated, with a steeple leaning awry, broken window panes, rotting eaves, and peeling stucco, covered with a mat of ivy (p. 3). The time is autumn and twilight is approaching:

> The aspect of melancholy, which was depressing even in the broad glare of noon, became almost intolerable under the waning light of the afterglow. (p. 20)

Here the oncoming darkness of winter and night surrounds the scenes of decay. The book begins with decay and darkness and ends with death. The corpse of Jonathan Gay lies in the parlor of Jordan's Journey.

> The windows were open, and through the closed shutters floated a pale greenish light and the sound of dead leaves rustling softly in the garden (p. 424). . . . Here the rustling of dead leaves grew louder, and faint scents of decay and mould were wafted through the evanescent beauty of the Indian summer. (p. 425)

As she did in The Voice of the People,[55] Ellen Glasgow again borrows the Gothic motif of ancestral portraits that seem to come to life as an objective correlative for the influence of the past.

> Every detail of the library -- the richness and heaviness of the furniture, the insipid fixed smiles in the family portraits, the costly fragility of the china ornaments -- all these seemed to unite in some occult power which overthrew her self-possession and paralyzed her emotions. (p. 219)

Virginia (1913)

Continuing American Gothicism's interest in psychology, Ellen Glasgow in this book explores the inner nature of Virginia Pendleton,

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[55]Pp. 7-8.

another Gothic Fair Maiden, the personification of ideal womanhood, and also that of her husband, Oliver Treadwell. Oliver's desire for Virginia comes to dominate even his will:

> He felt it like a hot wind blowing over him; and it seemed to him that he was as helpless as a leaf in the current of this wind which was sweeping him onward. Something older than his will was driving him. . . . (pp. 164-65)

Later, after he has become bored with Virginia because her dedication to tradition has kept her from sharing his interests, he confesses to her that he loves another woman, that he has fought it but that "this thing is stronger than I am" (p. 446). Virginia's inner nature, on the other hand, has more than one kind of passion. When she is told that the townspeople are gossiping about Oliver's riding so frequently with Abby, she has a sensation of violent anger.

> At the moment, the civilization of centuries was stripped from her, and she was as simple, as primitive, as a female of the jungle. . . . Not Virginia, but the primeval woman in the blood, shrieked out in protest as she saw her hold on her mate threatened. (pp. 283-84)

A few days later Virginia decides to go with Oliver and the others to ride after the hounds and to leave the children in the care of her mother. And although she has not ridden in a long while, she is driven to try to keep up with Abby.

> With the drumming of the blood in her ears, an almost savage joy awoke in her. Deep down in her, so deep that it was buried beneath the Virginia Pendleton whom she and her world knew, there stirred faintly the seeds of that ancient lust of cruelty from which have sprung the brutal pleasures of men. Part of her, that small secret part which was primitive, answered to the impulse of jealousy as it did to the rapturous baying of the hounds out of the red and gold distance. (p. 298)

The continuing revelation of these two inner natures is spun out against the background of Dinwiddie, which has an odd assortment of

dilapidation, evil odors, and enchantment. On Market Street where the Negroes live in their crumbling houses, there is a sharp acrid odour and the smell of rotting cabbage (p. 41). However, by the light of the moon, the town has another look:

> Under the pale beams the town lost its solidity and grew spectral. Nothing seemed to hold it to earth except the stillness which held the fallen flowers of the syringa there also. Even the church towers looked as ephemeral as spires of thistledown, and the winding streets which ran beside clear walls and dark shining gardens, trailed off from the ground and vanished into the silvery air. Only the black bulk of the Treadwell factory beside the river defied the magic of the moon's rays and remained a solid reminder of the breavity of all enchantment. (pp. 112-13)

Life and Gabriella (1916)

Like The Romance of a Plain Man this is the story of economic success, in this case, that of a woman who rises to prominence in the fashion industry of New York. Gabriella, a woman of vivid character and carefully controlled movements, nevertheless succumbs to the passion of anger when Ben O'Hara, a man she considers socially beneath her, dares to make love to her.

> She was no longer the reasonable and competent Gabriella, who had so successfully "managed her life"; she was primitive woman in the grip of primitive anger; and balance, moderation, restraint, had flown from her soul. (p. 486)

Also like The Romance of a Plain Man, the Gothic ingredients are few. Besides the suggestion of primitive passion, there is only a brief hint of decay in the mention of the neighborhood in Richmond where Gabriella lived with her widowed mother. It had once been fashionable but was now in a state of dilapidation (p. 12).

Barren Ground (1925)

Ellen Glasgow felt that this book, a thorough and forceful expression of the sub-theme, the influence of soil on soul, coming as it did after a period of fallow despondency, represented an important turning point in her development as a novelist. Following years of pain, sorrow, and disillusionment, she said that gradually "creative energy flooded my mind, and I felt, with some infallible intuition that my best work was ahead of me. I wrote Barren Ground and immediately I knew I had found myself."[56] In 1933 she wrote to Allen Tate that Barren Ground was her second favorite novel, after The Sheltered Life,[57] but in a 1944 letter to Signe Toksvig, she reversed the order and said Barren Ground was the one of her books she liked best.[58]

The soil-on-soul theme, which became a major pre-occupation of later Southern writers, is another way of stating the Gothic idea of the Sovereignty of Nature over man. McDowell believes this book establishes Ellen Glasgow's identity with agrarian sentiment.[59] Archibald Henderson says Miss Glasgow treats Nature in Barren Ground as "an influence upon, an ally of the human soul."[60] Allen W. Becker suggests that the central character, Dorinda Oakley, attempts to reclaim her soul by marrying it to the soil.[61]

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[56]Woman Within, p. 243.

[57]Letters, pp. 134-35.

[58]Ibid., p. 354.

[59]Ironic Art, p. 147.

[60]"Soil and Soul," Saturday Review of Literature, July 18, 1925, p. 907.

[61]"Agrarianism as a Theme in Southern Literature: The Period 1865-1925," Georgia Review (Summer 1957), 152.

Just as the castle in the early Gothic novels assumed the importance of a participating character, the land in Barren Ground is endowed with a kind of life. Dorinda asks herself: "Had not the land entered into their souls and shaped their moods into permanent or impermanent forms?" (p. 98) The soil, impoverished and neglected, gradually yields to broomsedge but hardly anything else. Broomsedge thus becomes a commanding image in the book, an image of Nature's dominion, of the primitive forces which lie ready to rule and control. It is said to be something that will cover and smother one in the end.

> It was the one growth in the landscape that thrived on barrenness; the solitary life that possessed an inexhaustible vitality. To fight it was like fighting the wild, free principle of nature. (p. 98)

The broomsedge and the earth from which it grows represent the power of Nature over the feeble efforts of man. Miss Glasgow tells her readers that Dorinda "never lost the feeling that the land contained a terrible force, whether for good or evil she could not tell" (p. 31). This reflects an earlier idea contained in the poem, "The Traveller" — of Nature as a threatening wildness.

A secondary theme in Barren Ground is the familiar Glasgow sub-theme, aristocratic debility. First pointed out in the discussion of the short story "Jordan's End," this idea says that human beings, even whole families, when they become weak and comfort-seeking will be overcome by the natural forces of decay. The Greylock family, once proud and influential in the community, has become degenerate. The old doctor ends his days as a drunkard, and his son, Jason, who was Dorinda's lover, is reduced to the level of animal existence before his life runs out. Five

Oaks, the Greylock farm, is now covered by sumach, sassafras, and life-everlasting (pp. 5-6). This is the way Dorinda sees Five Oaks:

> Dirt, mildew, decay everywhere! White turkeys that were discoloured by mould. Chips, trash, broken bottles littering the yard and the back steps, which were rotting to pieces. Windows so darkened by dust and cobwebs that they were like eyes blurred by cataract. (p. 103)

The land and the broomsedge are not the only forces of Nature that exercise a command over the inhabitants; the seasons and the elements are made to form an accompaniment to the tragic events of Dorinda's life. It is melancholy autumn when Dorinda discovers that she is pregnant and that Jason has deserted her to marry Geneva Ellgood. It is autumn at the time of her mother's death, and again when Jason dies. The first and last of these events take place with a violent storm raging in the background, suggesting a relationship between the raging of the emotions -- inner Nature -- and the fury of the elements -- outer Nature.

Imagery of desolation and death forms the structural pattern of the book. At the beginning of the story, the scene is set in this way:

> The tenant farmers, who had flocked after the ruin of war as buzzards after a carcass, had immediately picked the featureless landscape as clean as a skeleton. (p. 4)

At the end of the book the imagery of carrion and corpses is repeated in the description of the poor-house where Dorinda finds Jason near death:

> Withdrawn from the road, behind the fallen planks which had once made a fence, the poorhouse sprawled there, in the midst of the life-everlasting, like the sun-bleached skeleton of an animal which buzzards had picked clean of flesh. (p. 387)

Barren Ground, more than any other of Ellen Glasgow's novels, has an overall tone of melancholy and darkness, and a host of Gothic elements contribute to this. In the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century foul

smells were suggestive of Evil. In Barren Ground, Miss Glasgow likens the stale odour of the farm to that of a preserving fluid (p. 33), and she describes the dusty, musty, tobacco-whiskey smell of Five Oaks as "the stale odour of degeneration" (p. 308). The sentience of inanimate things is another Gothic touch. As she looks back at her own house, Dorinda sees it as having a living quality: "she was visited again by the image of the house as a frightened thing that waited, shrinking closer to the earth, for an inevitable disaster" (p. 45). Another time, on a day of family crisis, Dorinda has a similar sensation as she prepares the bed for her mother.

> As she turned down the bed and smoothed out the coarse sheets and the patchwork quilt, it seemed to Dorinda that the inanimate objects in the room borrowed pathos from their human companions. . . . What was it in houses and furniture that made them come to life in hours of suspense and tear at the heartstrings? (p. 251)

The snake, mythic symbol of evil, also has a role in Barren Ground. Dorinda, lying in a hospital bed in New York, after a nearly fatal accident wonders, as she recalls a story Jason had told her, if he would have deserted her, if the recent tragic events would have happened at all, if he had never seen the snake. This is Jason's account:

> I remember once, when I was a little child, I went out with Mother to gather dewberries, and just as I found the finest brier, all heavy with fruit, and reached down to pick it, a moccasin snake struck out at my hand. I got a fit, hysterics or something, and ever since then the sight of a snake has made me physically sick. Worse than that, whenever I reach out for anything I particularly want, I have a jumping of the nerves, just as if I expected a snake to strike. Queer, isn't it? I wonder how much influence that snake has had on my life? (p. 51)

Besides the snake, Barren Ground includes Aunt Mehitable Green, a benevolent sorceress, who is said to have a gift for removing moles,

warts and liver spots. (p. 104) There is also the mad Geneva Ellgood who runs out of the ruins in the old mill, waving a blue scarf and making violent gestures with her arms. (p. 292)

The Romantic Comedians (1926)

Some critics say The Romantic Comedians is Miss Glasgow's most brilliant work.[62] She herself felt it was the perfect, unsurpassed novel of manners.[63] Although essentially a comedy, sparkling with wit and satire, the book nevertheless has a somber atmosphere and continues her theme that Nature's passions and forces dominate man. It tells of the last romantic fling of an aging widower, and thus has contrasting themes of love and decay, which are reminiscent of the pairing of opposites in some of her poems. Here love itself becomes the primitive force of Nature which is sovereign over man and his reason. Passion is depicted as protruding through civilization's crust:

> Not only the cords of prudence about his heart, but the very crust of civilization, dissolved in the burning magic of that embrace. Forgetting his age, his dignity, his reputation, forgetting his secret fear of himself and of Annabel, he surrendered utterly to a youth that, since it lived only in dreams, was as inextinguishable as desire. (p. 157)

The controlling imagery -- such things as November leaves in the sunlight, the fire in an opal, and, particularly, the sunset -- supports these two themes by suggesting light without warmth. Almost every

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[62]Edward Wagenknecht, "Ellen Glasgow: Triumph and Despair," The Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1952), p. 273, and Dorothea Lawrance Mann, "Ellen Glasgow: Citizen of the World," The Bookman (Nov. 1926), p. 271.

[63]C. Hugh Holman, Three Modes of Southern Fiction (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966), p. 21.

important scene of the book occurs at sunset, a Gothic reminder of the force of oncoming darkness, with its mystery and foreboding. It is at sunset that Judge Honeywell sees Annabel and realizes that he is unwilling to move serenely into old age, forsaking one last adventure with love. On another sunset occasion, after he has just parted from Annabel, he dares to believe that he may be more than a friend to her. Later, seated in a deck chair while on their honeymoon voyage, Judge Honeywell gazes into the sunset and reflects that while his physical appearance may be that of an old man, his sense of well-being gives him the feeling of being thirty-five years old. Annabel and the judge have not been married long when a change overtakes her. He becomes startlingly aware of this when he discovers her at a window seat with her eyes raised to the wintry sunset:

> the clear contour of her head against the dark sunset and the hopeless despondency of her young figure, awoke, without a word, without a gesture, a sadness so profound that it was a supreme crisis of despair. (p. 247)

When spring comes again, a walk home in the windy dusk, with a pale yellow light still suffusing the west, brings waves of memory to the judge's mind. He enters the house just in time to see Annabel in the arms of another man. Again it is sunset and the room is filled with its after-glow when Annabel wails to her mother that she cannot live without love, that she would rather die than live without love. Finally, the judge, abandoned by Annabel and seriously ill, watches the flaming sunset from his bed as he reviews his life. He is reminded that it is spring once more and that its coming makes him feel almost as young as he did last year.

> Suddenly beneath the dark sunset, an apocalyptic light rained from the sky, and in this light all the tender little leaves of April were whispering together. (p. 346)

Spring is the structural motif of the book. The story begins in the spring of one year and ends in the spring of the next. Spring with its warmth and new life kindled a spark of desire in Judge Honeywell. The imagery of spring reinforces the love theme, but it is a spring presented alongside suggestions of melancholy. The opening scene depicts spring, but it is spring in the cemetery. The closing scene evokes spring but also the sick bed. It is spring given in terms of its dark counterpart, autumn:

> Up the long, straight street, the burnished light was enmeshed in the pale green of the branches. Faint, provocative scents of earth and flowers drifted toward him, now approaching, now roving away, as the wind stirred the fragrance. Warm, palpitating, amorous, all his thwarted hunger for life was enveloped there in the quivering breath of the twilight. The wistful sadness of spring, so different from the hopeless melancholy of autumn, brushed his mood with the taint, not of decay, but of desire. (p. 100)

They Stooped to Folly (1929)

Continuing in a mood of comic irony, Ellen Glasgow followed The Romantic Comedians with They Stooped to Folly three years later. McDowell believes there is nothing in American literature quite like these two for wit and satiric gayety.[64] The most original aspect of the latter work, he finds, is the full development of an idea contained in the earlier novel. He calls it the "sense of fracture between surface pleasantry and barely acknowledged submerged forces operating in society

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[64] Ironic Art, p. 183.

and human nature."[65] Ellen Glasgow had dealt with the primitive in man's inner nature before but never so thoroughly as in the study of Virginius Littlepage, a Virginia Gentleman who came to feel he had missed life. Miss Glasgow put into the mind of Virginius an idea she had used before, that civilization is a thin crust over primitive impulses.

> Though he told himself that the memory of the war had sunk in a black chill to the very pit of his soul, he knew that nothing else could be compared in vehemence with that witches' sabbath of released desires. . . . "For once we were natural," he thought. . . . "We were trying to be too superior, and it was a relief, even to the women, especially to the women, when the savage hunger broke through the thin crust we call civilization." (pp. 4-5)

Virginius has a sense of this same idea as he becomes aware that he has always had a secret leaning toward low impulses, in spite of diligent efforts to be right-minded. "But something stronger than his will -- was it a secret pulse of wildness in his heart -- had urged him to an irregular alliance with the obscure and the profligate" (p. 27). Still later, as he responds to the vivid excitement of Amy Dalrymple, he feels himself struggling against forces he cannot understand (p. 272). In the dichotomy of Virginius Littlepage is the echo of Gothic character -- the monk or the nobleman who is outwardly righteous but inwardly evil.

A somber pattern is given to this comedy of manners in the same way as the other. Both the opening and closing scenes are suffused with melancholy. In the beginning pages of <u>They Stooped to Folly</u>, Virginius Littlepage is introduced as a man with a sense that his life is more than half over and that he has missed living. This gloomy reflection is spun out with an autumn storm raging in the background. The closing scene,

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[65] McDowell, <u>Ironic Art</u>, p. 184.

with Virginius trying to comfort his pregnant daughter whose husband has run away, takes place at sunset in a wintry garden, where the cold wind drives dead leaves into piles. Another time a moonlight night forms the background for Virginius' sense of desolate futility.

> Overhead, beneath a closed sky, there was the fluttering of shredded mist; but toward the south and west a low range of clouds shone silver-black beneath the pale lustre of moonlight. Poised between the eternal illusions of time and space, the world appeared to hang suspended in the midst of an encompassing desolation. And out of this desolation, it seemed to him that a burden of futility poured like a shower of ashes into his soul. (pp. 92-93)

The Sheltered Life (1932)

Blair Rouse and Frederick P. W. McDowell both regard this as Ellen Glasgow's best novel. Whatever else it may be, it certainly marks the culmination of the Gothic strain in her work both in theme and treatment. The theme, the existence of Evil in the uncontrolled passions residing in man's inner nature, is exhaustively developed in a Gothic atmosphere of sunset scenes, a decaying neighborhood, a wild untended garden, and an evil odour.

The novel is set in Queenborough in a neighborhood of diminished grandeur, now permeated with the foul smell that comes from a nearby chemical plant. The story concerns two families, the Archbalds -- Jenny Blair and her family -- and the Birdsongs -- Eva and George -- and the development of an illicit relationship between young Jenny Blair and George, the husband of the woman she passionately admires.

Throughout the book Miss Glasgow stresses the disparity between outward appearance and inner decay by pointing to the dual nature of her characters. The veneer of civilization sometimes fails to suppress the

passions. The distinguished, though faded, Archbalds are said to be subject to intermittent flashes of nature, implying a periodic eruption of uncontrolled forces. As a child of nine, Jenny Blair had discovered that she possessed a "hidden self" (p. 3). In a conversation with George Birdsong in which he confesses to "a roving nature" (pp. 64-65), Jenny Blair realizes that part of her hidden self is the same "roving nature," that being the source of her impulse to go down to the place where the evil odour comes from (p. 41).

> Nobody, least of all her mother, could understand the fascinated horror that drew her, like a tightened cord, toward the unknown and forbidden. (p. 43)

Jenny Blair gradually begins to notice a similar dual nature in others. Once she sees her mother for an instant "with the artificial cheerfulness wiped away from her face" (p. 92). She wonders about her Aunt Etta, too, having caught her once in an expression that was not her usual composure (pp. 94-95). And she notices, despite Eva Birdsong's ideal beauty and facade of happiness, that something dark, fugitive, and defiant is in the faint smile on her lips (p. 109). George, too, has a double identity, described by General Archbald:

> George has the kindest heart in the world. But even the kindest heart in the world sometimes fails to get the better of nature. (p. 132)

Jenny Blair, thinking of her passion for George and at the same time of her love for Eva, sees the baser impulse as something beyond will, as if some "winged power over which she had no control had swept her from the earth to the sky" (p. 279). It is this uncontrolled passion which ultimately triggers the primitive instinct of jealousy in the supremely

controlled Eva Birdsong, and the power of that passion pulls the trigger, literally, on George Birdsong.

Miss Glasgow here, as in other works, relies on sunset scenes for a sense of drama, of melancholy and foreboding. It is sunset as Eva waits for George to come home, and his lateness suggests that something may be wrong (pp. 78-79). It is sunset when the child Jenny Blair first conceives her passion for the man George Birdsong (pp. 57-58). Again it is sunset in the shelter of an overgrown garden when Jenny Blair, at seventeen, is first kissed by the forty-two-year-old George Birdsong.

The forest as the image of evil and of threat is chosen for the setting of Jenny Blair's nightmare after she has allowed herself to express her love to George. She dreams she is running through a dark forest, pursued in endless circles by something she cannot see (p. 241). Moreover, Eva and George are personifications of the opposing forces of Nature and Civilization. Eva as the Fair Maiden and ideal of womanhood represents the apex of civilization, while George is a creature motivated by something primitive in man's inner nature. For example, George's garden, untended, grows wild, while Eva engages herself in growing hot-house plants. Eva keeps a pet bird in a cage, but George goes hunting to shoot wild ducks. In the end, however, Eva also succumbs to Nature's passions, to the primitive feelings of jealousy and vengeance. Nature is clearly Sovereign.

Vein of Iron (1935)

Up to this point Ellen Glasgow has seen Nature's Evil as both external and internal. But in the story of Ada Fincastle, a girl who, like her own Glasgow forebears, lived in the hill country of Virginia

before forsaking it for urban life in Richmond, a shift in viewpoint is apparent. Here Nature's Evil is expressed almost entirely in terms of man's inner nature, his greedy cruelty and his stupidity. Nature's external form has, in this book, become largely benevolent.

Janet's cruelty in tricking Ralph into giving up Ada and marrying her instead is seen by Ada in terms of a traditional Gothic element, the predatory bird:

> She stared through tears at a soaring hawk, which swooped suddenly, glashed downward like a curved blade in the air, and seized a small bird -- or it may have been one of Aunt Meggie's chickens -- in its claws before it swept upward and onward. And she felt that the same claws had seized her heart out of her breast, and had swept away with it over the sunny land, over the tranquil blue of the hills. (p. 161)

Ada later reflects that life contains no security, that horror waits everywhere to pounce upon happiness (pp. 167-68). Once she remembers that her father said: "Shelters and systems and civilizations were all overwhelmed in time . . . by the backward forces of ignorance, of barbarism, of ferocity" (p. 359). Miss Glasgow also employs a skeleton to describe Ada's view of life. The occasion is the burial of her mother, Mary Evelyn Fincastle:

> In the churchyard Ada saw only the open grave, and heard only the clods of earth falling, falling. Her father's arm felt fleshless as a bleached bone in her grasp, and it seemed to her that the universe, with all that it contained, was pared down to a skeleton. (pp. 178-79)

The turn in perspective can also be seen in this novel in the use of the forest as an image not of threatening wildness but of sanctuary. It is to the wilderness of the mountain that Ada and Ralph go to escape that which keeps them apart. In the forest they find protection, even ecstasy. There on a bed of pine boughs in the moonlight new life is

generated. Nature is Good. Man, through his primitive Nature, is Evil.

Vein of Iron adds another to the collection of Ellen Glasgow's decayed houses. When John Fincastle, Ada's father, returns to the hill country to die, he seeks out the old manse where he and his family had lived for several generations.

> The manse was dilapidated, crumbling to ruins, smothered in weeds and in rubbish . . . (p. 456)

Finally, there is the presence of the Gothic grotesque, the maimed or deformed figure which suggests an inexplicable evil. In Vein of Iron such a figure is Toby Waters, the idiot boy who is tormented by the other children and whose mother keeps an evil-smelling pig sty.

In This Our Life (1941)

Although Ellen Glasgow, with failing health and energy, clearly reaffirmed in her final novel the theme that man is ruled by Nature's passions, or by his primitive inner nature, the usual Gothic reinforcement for the theme is almost entirely missing. Here again Nature is seen as benevolent, not threatening. One autumn scene in the country, instead of providing a background of melancholy, suggests warmth, transfigured beauty, and joy. In only one spot does Miss Glasgow summon the customary language of the macabre. When Asa goes to Baltimore after his son-in-law's suicide, he arrives just as day is beginning, and the empty streets and the wintry air suggest to him "the chill of a vault," "sodden gloom," and "the stale odour of death" (p. 279).

That man's inner nature can dominate the structures of civilization -- or that Evil can overpower Good -- is an idea that persisted with her to the

end. Asa Timberlake represents a man, inconspicuous in appearance, but containing within a "sleeping giant, who so often turned and struggled below the waking stream of thoughts and events" (p. 7). Asa himself is aware of a passion which cannot be seen on the surface, of dark impulses lying beneath the surface of character. Hurt over the desertion of his daughter by her husband,

> he felt that his heart was bursting with rage; and he knew, with a blinding flash of insight, that it was in the nature, if not in the will, of every man to do murder. Below the disintegrated surface of character, he had discovered that there was a bottomless abyss of dark impulses. I didn't know it was in me, he thought. (p. 153)

Reinforcing the discovery of the primitive in Asa's nature is the depiction of raw animal magnetism in the personality of his daughter, Stanley. Except for Asa, all of the men who are exposed to her -- her doting uncle, her sister's husband, her sister's fiancee -- respond to Stanley with animalistic unreason. And this power of Stanley's is presented as far more potent than the civilized virtues of her sister, Roy, who is intelligent, compassionate, and in control of her base impulses. Miss Glasgow herself described the theme of this book as the "conflict of human beings with human nature, of civilization with biology,"[66] and she felt that with In This Our Life she had woven together all of her earlier themes.[67]

Although she gave them uneven emphasis, throughout Glasgow's novels are the threads of Gothicism -- the theme that Evil is in Nature, externally and internally, and that Nature is sovereign; the sub-themes of

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[66] Certain Measure, p. 250.

[67] Woman Within, p. 286.

aristocratic debility, the effect of soil on soul, and the influence of the past; the motifs of darkness, death, and decay; and a full assortment of traditional Gothic elements.

The first four novels discussed -- The Voice of the People, The Deliverance, The Romance of a Plain Man, and The Miller of Old Church -- deal in different ways with the displacement of the aristocracy by the middle class. These four illustrate the rising and ebbing Gothic emphasis that occurs throughout the novels. Although all of these deal basically with the same situation, The Deliverance and The Miller of Old Church are dominated by the Gothic quality, while The Voice of the People and The Romance of a Plain Man are merely highlighted by it.

The subsequent three novels -- Virginia, Life and Gabriella, and Barren Ground -- are concerned with the breaking of the traditional role of women. These, too, make varying use of Gothic elements. There is very little Gothicism in Life and Gabriella, and it is basic to but not dominant in Virginia, but Barren Ground is weighted with melancholy and desolation and the forceful assertion of the Sovereignty of Nature in the soil-on-soul sub-theme.

The last five novels -- The Romantic Comedians, They Stooped to Folly, The Sheltered Life, Vein of Iron, and In This Our Life -- state that civilization is but a frail veneer over the potent passions that rule man's primitive inner nature. In The Romantic Comedians, They Stooped to Folly, and The Sheltered Life this idea is strongly reinforced by Gothic mood, motifs, and, in the case of the latter, the sub-theme of aristocratic debility. While these Gothic trappings begin to fall away in the last two novels, the idea persists even through the strange shift in viewpoint that can be seen in Vein of Iron.

The Gothic threads of Ellen Glasgow's novels, pulled from the past and thrust into the future, sometimes pale, sometimes vibrant, weave a pattern of dark and ominous beauty and excitement as they explore the meaning of Evil and man's relationship with Nature.

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